

# Country News

SERVING NORTH SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

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## Eye examination saved Templeton girl's life

*Children's eye doctor searches for cause of vision problem and finds a brain tumor*

By Scott Steepleton  
Managing Editor

Ten months ago Staci Rogers was diagnosed with a brain tumor. This week she's making the rounds of Florida theme parks, and getting slimed Nickelodeon-style thanks to the Make a Wish Foundation.

That the future veterinarian with the blue-gray eyes and dimples that won't quit is able to participate in a trip others her age only dream of is the result of an observant children's eye doctor. And the 7-year-old's story of survival is one that should make other parents take notice.

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**"Most tumors cause problems because they grow and push on other parts of the brain." Dr. Rena Stathacopoulos**

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On November 16, 1994 Staci and the rest of the first-grade class at Templeton Elementary School were given a routine vision screening, the sort that all districts in the area provide with the help of local eye doctors and service clubs.

The screening indicated that Staci, who was 6 at the time, was nearsighted and needed a complete eye exam.

Staci's parents, Patti and Pat, took her to Dr. Rena Stathacopoulos in San Luis Obispo. During the examination Stathacopoulos found out that Staci was having headaches and recurring vomiting—familiar symptoms to the doctor whose specialty is children's vision.



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Stathacopoulos did some aggressive testing and discovered a tumor in Staci's pineal gland located at the back of the brain. The pinealblastoma as it is called, blocks the flow of fluid, causing headaches. Pressure inside the brain is elevated causing swelling of the optic nerve which in turn can cause vision problems.

"Luckily the eye doctor listened to us. Staci could have been dead within a week," said Patti, a substitute teacher.

Because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Stathacopoulos could not speak specifically about Staci's condition, however, "I was the beginning of a very trying time in their life," she said.

Once Stathacopoulos made her diagnosis, Staci was taken to the UC San Francisco Medical Center

for treatment, which included more than a month of radiation and chemotherapy, numerous blood transfusions, and an operation to remove the tumor that left what Staci likes to call her "zipper"—a five-inch scar that resembles a zipper—on the back of her neck.

With 40 percent of the tumor removed—there's an 80-percent chance

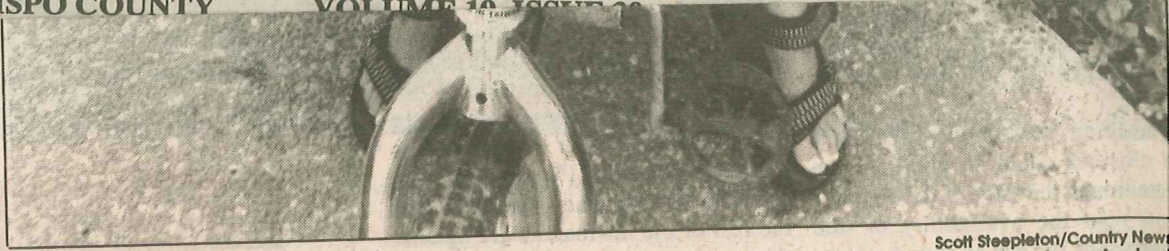
it will not return—Staci is back to water skiing and dancing at a Paso Robles studio, and she especially likes riding the bike she received in August for her birthday.

But Staci's treatments are far from over. She'll continue magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) procedures every three months to monitor her condition, and after 10 years she may be

clear of any real danger.

Throughout the ordeal, say her parents, Staci has kept her sense of humor. She got a big kick out of Patti and Pat's having to practice injections on one another before they could do the real thing on her. And after she was in the hospital for a time, Staci said, "Isn't it nice

□ Please see EYE page



When 7-year-old Staci Rogers isn't playing with her sister Krista, 9, or riding her birthday bike she's being a typical second-grader. Ten months ago, a brain tumor nearly took her life. Scott Steepleton/Country News

## □ EYE

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won't need glasses now."

For the occasional moments of fun, watching their daughter react to radiation and chemotherapy, watching as her teeth got progressively worse due to recurring fits of stomach upset, and enduring seemingly never ending hospital stays took a toll on Patti and Pat, both in their 30s.

"We couldn't have got through it by ourselves," said Pat, vice president of operations for a gasoline distributor. "Our faith got stronger through this."

Now that Staci is doing better, Pat says it's time to get back to being the close family they always have been.

"An E-ticket ride is what it's been," Pat said with a laugh, "and now I want an A-ticket ride."

Stathacopoulos sees children from Lompoc to King City, and in the almost four years she's been in practice on the Central Coast she has seen at least four children who have been diagnosed with a tumor after being recommended for further testing following a school-based vision screening.

"Most tumors cause problems because they grow and push on other parts of the brain," she said.

How does a parent know if his or her child needs more than glasses to correct a vision problem? Stathacopoulos recommends that every child between the ages of 3-6 have at least one complete exam by an eye care professional.

"Children's eyes are pretty healthy," she said, so when an older child's eyes are presenting problems the child is likely to complain.

However, young children can not

always be counted on to provide reliable information. For example, a 3-year-old likely won't complain about a problem with his or her vision. Instead, the youngster is likely to just

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**"Isn't it nice I won't need glasses now."  
Staci Rogers**

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think that everybody's vision is that way, Stathacopoulos said.

As time goes on, the problem can get even worse.

One problem common among youngsters is amblyopic vision, in which one eye is not as strong as the other causing a blurry image to be

transmitted to the brain.

The problem can be corrected in a 3-year-old by using a patch at regular intervals over the bad eye. "The brain will catch up" to the eye's deficiency, Stathacopoulos said.

If the child reaches 9 or 10 and still is having difficulty due to amblyopic vision, "the brain is done growing and it can't be fixed," she said.

Patti and Pat are looking forward to Staci growing up and attending college, and realizing her dream to be a vet. And they hope she can pass on to others her experiences.

"She's going to be touched from this forever, and our dream is that she would help others make it through," Patti said.

## JENNIFER SONI

# Interior Design

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